

# The Facilitative Role of Written Language in Speaking: Using Writing Activities to Improve L2 Speaking

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Writing is not simply speech written down on a sheet of paper. There are a number of ways in which writing and speaking differ. According to Finegan (1994), there are four differences between writing and speaking: a). Speaking has such channels as intonation, voice pitch and gestures to convey information, whereas writing has only words and syntax; b). Writing requires more time than speaking in terms of planning; c). Speakers and addressees are often face-to-face, while writers and readers are not; d). Speaking tends to rely on the context of the interaction more than writing.

However, there is no absolute dichotomy (Finegan 1994). For instance, lectures and job interviews may need as much planning as writing. In face-to-face communication, speakers are said to use more personal expressions such as *I think* and *you see*, but those expressions could be seen in personal letters as well. When it comes to the reliance on context, speakers may use more spatial and temporal deixis such as *this* and *today*, but a written note can read *Don't do this!* as long as the referent of *this* is clear for the reader. Even for communication channels, we are able to convey additional information in writing by using bold and italic print.

In short, although speaking and writing are different systems, they share many features. Reid (1991) claims that the differences between oral and written discourse form a kind of continuum, which is dependent on situation, task, audience, and function. Therefore, it is reasonable to say that writing and speaking have a close relationship.

In L1 research, there are studies which have attempted to examine the relationship between oral and written language. From a sociolinguistic perspective, there are several studies showing how spoken language, especially dialect, affects writing (e.g., Whiteman 1981). From the developmental perspective, there are studies on syntactic development in children's first language (e.g., Hunt 1965), followed by comparable studies with second or foreign language learners (e.g., Vann 1979).

However, little research has been conducted on how written language affects speaking, not to mention on the use of writing to help improve speaking based on this writing-speaking relationship. The reason may be that we tend to take it for granted that writing acquisition comes after speaking acquisition, although it is not unusual that some learners are more proficient in writing than speaking L2 in EFL contexts like Japan.

## **Rationale of using writing activities for speaking**

The idea of using writing to improve speaking may sound a little strange to many people as common sense tells us speaking should be improved by the practice of speaking. However, there are three advantages of using writing to promote speaking:

1. Writing is easier to handle for those who are not ready to speak up in class, psychologically and/or physically.
2. Writing can reinforce what has been practiced orally while providing practice in forms that are more fully realized in writing (Rivers and Temperly 1978).
3. Writing activities are applicable to a large class if the activities require no teacher response.

Therefore, it is worthwhile to seek ways writing could serve oral proficiency development in L2. Of course, we cannot expect our students to improve their speech drastically solely through writing activities. Writing activities are expected to facilitate speaking in an indirect way, and expected to be used as a warm up activity and homework.

## **Writing Activities**

Since writing and speaking have many features in common, by deliberately controlling a number of variables, writing teachers can make writing closer to speaking. The important thing is that the task itself should not be very difficult when the aim of writing is to improve speaking. In this sense, free-writing techniques and the communicative approach are thought to be appropriate for this purpose. If the students already know the basic skills of writing such as grammar, vocabulary, and punctuation, the task becomes much easier.

## **Free-writing Technique**

The free-writing technique is one of the ways to make writing more like speaking. It is a pre-writing technique which encourages students to overcome their fear of the blank page and their preoccupation with correctness. Elbow (1973:3) explains as follows:

The idea is simply to write for ten minutes (later on, perhaps fifteen or twenty). Don't stop for anything. Go quickly without rushing. Never stop to look back, to cross something out, to wonder how to spell something, to wonder what word or thought to use, or to think about what you are doing. If you can't think of a word or a spelling, just use a squiggle or else write, "I can't think of it." Just put down something. The easiest thing is just to put down whatever is in your mind. If you get stuck, it's fine to write "I can't think what to say, I can't think what to say" as many times as you want: or repeat the last word you wrote over and over again: or anything else. The only requirement is that you never stop.

In other words, free-writing could be a written version of impromptu speech.

The following procedure is how I organize free-writing in my class. First, students are assigned a topic (hobbies, family, my dream, etc.). Second, they have five minutes to write. Third, students

can write anything with any writing style. Fourth, students can make as many grammatical and spelling mistakes as they want. Fifth, students cannot refer to any dictionaries or textbooks. With this guidance, students are required to fill in a 4 x 6 inch sheet of paper with ten lines. In this way, students have no recourse other than continuing to write without worrying about grammar, the quality of the ideas, or editing.

## Communicative Approach

The communicative approach stresses the audience and the purpose of a piece of writing (Raimes 1983). In order to make the writing activity a written version of oral communication, such techniques as brainstorming, skits, and interviews are useful. As in the case with the free- writing technique, it is important to provide students a limited period of time while they are encouraged to write as many sentences as possible without worrying about making mistakes. Let us take up each technique briefly to see how it can be used.

In brainstorming, students write based on a map, picture, or personal experience. For example, by looking at a picture of a dog, students may write sentences such as the following: "It is brown," "I think it is a puppy," "I want to keep this dog," and so on.

Skits can be used in a similar way to brainstorming. For instance, the teacher shows students a picture of a young couple and asks them to write down a possible conversation. They may come up with a conversation like:

*Man:* Are you hungry?

*Woman:* Yes. Let's go to a fancy restaurant.

*Man:* What kind of restaurant do you want to go to?

*Woman:* How about a Thai restaurant?

With interviews, the teacher makes up a set of questions that an interviewer might ask, and students respond in writing. For instance:

*Where are you from?*

*What do you do on weekends?*

*What subject do you like best?*

*Do you live by yourself? etc.*

Needless to say, the techniques above can lead to an effective transition from writing to oral practice as students share and discuss their writing with the teacher or other classmates. The point here, however, is that these writing activities in themselves contain elements which strengthen speaking, and they are not merely a starter for oral communication. This is a positive reinterpretation of the role of writing in the communicative approach.

## Conclusion

In this article, I first attempted to reinterpret writing activities based on the analysis of the nature of written and spoken language, and then discussed how writing activities could be put into practice to facilitate speaking. It is hoped that the ideas presented will shed some light on the role of writing activities in the language classroom.

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